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SUBJECT: DAY IN LIFE OF NORTH KOREAN DEFECTORS IN SOUTH
KOREA: THEIR WEDDINGS, TESTIMONIES, CHALLENGES AND HOPES

REF: SEOUL 004283

11. (SBU) Summary: Poloff attended the second annual group wedding for four North Korean defector couples organized by a South Korean NGO. The couples were grateful for the ceremony, which they postponed because of lack of funding. Poloff also met with two of the brides to discuss their experiences in, and en route to, South Korea. Choi arrived in South Korea in 2006, after leaving North Korea in 1998. Lee escaped in 2001, finally arriving in South Korea in January 2008 after spending four years in different prisons. Both left North Korea in search of food, lost their lump sum ROKG subsidy to brokers waiting at the doorstep, experienced discrimination in the South Korean job market and continue to face economic hardship because the KRW 590,000 (about USD 450) monthly handout from the ROKG is just not enough. Despite current hardship, both brides were hopeful that a brighter future is ahead for their children. End Summary.

Group Wedding for North Korean Defectors

12. (SBU) On November 29, four North Korean defector couples held their wedding ceremony in Yong-in city, about an hour south of Seoul. Approximately 150 guests attended the ceremony, half of whom were volunteers from the sponsoring NGO. The one-hour ceremony included exchange of vows, North Korean wedding songs sung by a 10-member choir from Hanawon equipped with an accordion, and reading of a poem composed by a North Korean defector in the audience, followed by a reception in the upper floor of the wedding hall. The mood was celebratory, despite tears of many attendees, including the couples themselves. VIP Guests included Hanawon Director Ko Kyung-bin and Yong-in Deputy Mayor Choi Sung-dai.

Sponsoring NGO: Saripmoon

13. (SBU) The group wedding was sponsored by Saripmoon, an NGO founded in 2003 to assist elders and physically and mentally challenged individuals. Saripmoon, which refers to the "front gate" in old Korean homes in the countryside, began assisting North Korean defectors in 2006. Saripmoon sponsored a wedding ceremony for North Korean defectors for the first time in 2007, initially planned as a one-time event. Three couples were married then. At the request of defectors themselves, Saripmoon hosted another wedding ceremony this year. Two of the three couples married last year attended this year's wedding as volunteers. Saripmoon

consists of 10 board members, about 45 sponsors and 100 members, and receives no government funding.

¶4. (SBU) Saripmoon Chairman Kim Jin-hee, also a small business owner trading construction material in the city of Yong-in, said that North Korean defector couples are often already married, some with children, but have never held a wedding ceremony because of the cost. With no pictures of the wedding day, or an anniversary date, defector couples feel less committed to their partner and are likely to flee at the first sign of trouble, according to Kim. Kim shared that he received thank-you messages from couples who were married on November 28, 2007, grateful for Kim's assistance in making them feel like a "real married couple."

Meet the Brides: Choi Kum-sil, Mother of Two, and Former DPRK Army Lee Myung-ok

¶5. (SBU) Poloff met with two of the brides on December 10 to discuss their new lives in South Korea. Choi Kum-sil (protect) defected from her hometown Haeryung in North Hamkyung province in 1998 in search of food. She spent eight years in China, working for food and hiding from the Chinese authorities. Choi arrived in South Korea in November 2006. She recalled the time in China, "not having my own country," as the most shameful period in her life. She does not have regular contacts with her family in Haeryung.

¶6. (SBU) Former DPRK soldier Lee Myung-ok (protect) arrived in South Korea January 2008. She left North Korea for the

first time in 2001 and was repatriated multiple times. Altogether, Lee spent more than four years in prisons -- in Chinese jails, North Korean interrogation centers and Thai detention centers. Lee also spent almost two years in a political prison camp in Oh-ro, which she described as "a little better than Yodok." Lee explained that she was surprised to have made it out alive, since about half of the prisoners die in the prison camp. She credited six years of experience in the DPRK Army for her survival.

Interrogation Questions: DPRK Deeply Concerned About Contact with ROK Citizens, Media and Christians

¶7. (SBU) Calling herself as an "interrogation expert," Lee listed the following questions as "standard questions" which the DPRK authorities ask to all detainees returned by Chinese authorities at the border. If a detainee would answer anything other than a firm "no" to any of the questions, the detainee would never be freed, Lee explained.

-- Did you meet any South Koreans?
-- Did you see any South Korean TV programs?
-- Did you listen to South Korean radio?
-- Did you meet any South Korean Christians?
-- Are you a Christian?

Because Lee "knew the drill" and did not provide answers to any of the questions, she received an additional beating, but a beating was far better than death, she said.

Rough Beginning: Brokers at Door Step for Payment; Forced to Forfeit All Subsidies Received from ROKG

¶8. (SBU) Like other defectors, both Choi and Lee were processed through Hanawon; Choi is the graduate of the 92nd class and Lee the 100th. (NOTE: Hanawon's graduation classes are similar to the Foreign Service A-100 classes, in class size, length, and opportunity for bonding. Like FSOs, Hanawon alumni will identify with their class batch, or "ki," number. By comparing each other's "ki" number, one can easily estimate the time of arrival in South Korea.

Currently, the 122-ki began processing at Hanawon in the second week of December, 2008. END NOTE.) Both recalled the time in Hanawon to be the "most comfortable" in their lives.

¶9. (SBU) The tough reality in South Korea began as early as Hanawon graduation. The day Choi received her resettlement money (distributed in a lump sum back in 2006), her broker was waiting at the Hanawon gate. The broker also waited for Choi at the door steps of her new government-funded apartment. She owed KRW 3,500,000 (about USD 3,500 at the time). Choi gave all of her ROKG lump sum subsidy, KRW 2,700,000 (or USD 2,700) to her broker and worked in multiple restaurants to pay back the remaining sum within a month, before the high interest payment started to compound. Choi explained that "everyone" is aware of brokers' practices, including the police and Hanawon, but they "cannot interfere" since it was an oral agreement made between her and the broker, which ultimately led Choi to South Korea. On her "real first day" in South Korea, on her own in her new home, Choi painted a grim picture of a new beginning with no furniture, no food, and no friends -- just like her days before arriving in South Korea.

¶10. (SBU) Lee, who arrived three years after Choi, also had a broker waiting at her new home. Lee owed KRW 4,500,000 (or USD 4,500) to the broker and she is still making payments, because the subsidy that Lee received at the end of her Hanawon stay is no longer distributed in one lump sum, but divided into multiple installments of smaller sums. The broker price has gone up in the past few years also, according to Lee.

Continued Difficulties: Widespread Prejudice; Still Without A Country

¶11. (SBU) Choi said that even after three years living in South Korea, She does not feel like a South Korean, nor is she accepted as one. Choi recalled numerous job interviews where the interviewer's behavior drastically changed once Choi provided her national identification (KID) number. (NOTE: Korean ID numbers include the ID holder's gender, hometown and DOB. Earlier cohorts of North Korean defectors share the same "hometown" number, which identifies them as defectors. This issue has been addressed within the ROKG KID issuing office and recent KIDs issued to newly arrived defectors do not allow such easy spotting. END NOTE.) Choi also said that some South Korean restaurant owners did not pay the full day's wage when they found out that she was from North Korea.

¶12. (SBU) With no real connection to South Korean society, Choi admitted that South Korea does not feel like her country. In China, she had food, but no peace of mind in her hiding place. In Korea, her mind is at peace, but she struggles economically and socially. She hoped at least that her children will "feel at home" in South Korea when they grow up. Choi is a mother of two; her youngest daughter is six-months old.

Down, but Not Out: Small Subsidy, but Big Dreams for Future

¶13. (SBU) Choi and Lee said that they receive a monthly sum of KRW 390,000 (about USD 300) per adult defector in the family from the ROKG. Their husbands are not eligible since they are Chinese nationals whom they met during their stay in China and invited to the ROK after their settlement. Assistance is available for their children, however. Each child born to a defector mother receives KRW 200,000 per month, or approximately USD 150.

¶14. (SBU) Despite difficult economic circumstances, Choi and Lee both dreamed of having a better life in the future. One of the defector brides who wed last year through Saripmoon,

Kim hae-young, enrolled in a beauty school, also subsidized by the ROKG. Choi hopes to follow Kim's footsteps as soon as she finishes nursing. Lee, who is a trained masseuse in China, was disappointed that the massage culture is not as widespread in South Korea as is in China. She hopes to work hard in South Korea to save enough money to open a spa specializing in massage in China. Just as dreamy, Lee recalled the wedding day, when she wore "a dress for the first time in her life."

Fond Memories of Kim Il-Sung, but Deathwish for Kim Jong-il

¶15. (SBU) Lee blamed Kim Jong-il for hundreds of corpses she saw along the roads in North Korea, as a result of starvation. "I hope he (KJI) will rot soon," Lee said. When speaking of her childhood, including the time when she was the final candidate picked from her hometown to participate in the prestigious "state receptionist training program" in Pyongyang, she referred to Kim Il-sung as "our beloved Great Leader and General" and spoke fondly of the Kim Il-sung days, freeing him of any responsibility for the current state which North Korea is in. Lee said it was good to have food in South Korea, but "everything else was better in the North," referring to South Korea's high cost of living compared to virtually "free" items in North Korea.

Comment

¶16. (SBU) Despite a common language and shared history, South Korean society and North Korean defectors are not yet ready and willing to accept each other fully. These defectors, like others we have spoken to, feel discriminated against and don't think they can compete with South Korean candidates in the job market. After relying on the state for all aspects of their lives, they find the new life in a free-market system too competitive and exhausting. As the quality of ROKG support for defectors likely to decline as more North Koreans arrive, the gap will only get wider.
STEPHENS